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## ABSTRACT

Even Start family literacy programs in Texas were evaluated by outside evaluators. Data were gathered from two groups. The first group consisted of 631 families who were enrolled in 11 Even Start programs in Texas during the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 program years. A survey, in English or Spanish, was administered to all parents in attendance on two days in late spring and academic gains were measured by standardized tests. The second group consisted of 582 families who had exited the same Even Start programs during the 1996-1999 program years. From this second group, about 25 families per program were contacted for data. Some of the findings of the study were the following: (1) parents have definite goals when enrolling in Even Start; (2) parents learn about Even Start from a variety of sources; (3) parents in Even Start increase their reading and writing activities and their academic abilities; (4) participating in Even Start increases the amount of time parents read to their children, help their children with learning activities, and spend with their children's teacher; (5) children in Even Start increase their academic abilities and improve in school; (6) parents are more likely to become employed after participating in Even Start programs; (7) parents in Even Start programs believe they have become good role models for their children; (8) parents who participate in Even Start programs become better consumers; and (9) families who participate in Even Start become more involved in their communities, become healthier, and feel more in control of their lives. (Contains 20 tables.) (KC)

# Effects of Selected Even Start Family Literacy Programs in Texas on Participating Children and Parents

Presented at the National Even Start Association Conference  
San Diego, California

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# Effects of Selected Family Literacy Programs in Texas on Participating Children and Parents

## Introduction

Family Literacy programs, like other educational programs, are under increased pressure to document their positive effects upon participating families. However, both "Evaluation" and "Accountability" sometimes receive negative feelings from program staff when educational programs are reviewed for their effectiveness in delivering what is supposed to be delivered. At the same time, both are becoming increasingly important and are receiving more attention from policy-makers at federal and state levels.

## The Problem

Some evidence of the successes of family literacy programs have begun to emerge, but most of it is related to short-term effects, usually some kinds of measures of knowledge or skill increase in less than one year, for both children and adults. Early evidence of the use of qualitative measures of family literacy success was documented by Taylor (1983), in her in-depth study of six white middle-class families living in suburban homes within a fifty-mile radius of New York City. Seaman, (1991) followed with an evaluation of the model used at the National Center for Family Literacy. However, more than a decade later, we are still looking for way to determine to what extent desired change has occurred in achieving both short-term and long-term outcomes in family literacy (Benjamin and Lord, 1996). This need has also been documented by Hayes (1996) who has been evaluating family literacy programs for many years.

## Methodology

Staff at the Texas Center for Adult Literacy and Learning, Texas A&M University, provide external evaluation services to a number of Even Start programs in the state and the study sample was derived from only those programs. "Family" in this study refers only to the parents and the pre-school children participating in those programs included in this study.

## Sample and Data Acquisition

The population sample for this research study consisted of two groups:

- a. The first group consisted of 631 families who were enrolled in 11 Even Start programs in Texas during the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 program years. Because of a variety of problems working with Even Start families, random selection was not possible. Instead, program staff, in cooperation with the researchers, selected two specific days in late spring (usually April) when all parents in attendance were administered a survey instrument, either in English or Spanish. Academic gains, measured by standardized tests, of those same parents and their children were determined by pre and posttests.

b. The second group consisted of 582 families who had exited the same Even Start Programs during the 1996-1999 program years, for whatever reason, e.g., GED attainment, leaving the program to take employment, moving out of the community, etc. Because of the difficulty of locating this group, and since no external funds had been acquired to conduct this research, a telephone-interview survey was utilized to acquire the data. If more than 50 families had exited a program, a table of random numbers was used to select the group to be contacted. The target was 25 families per program. In some cases, whoever could be found was interviewed because many families could not be located or did not have telephones.

Therefore, the data cannot be generalized beyond those programs included in this research study. Readers should take from the data only what is meaningful to them and not try to project beyond what is contained in this report.

Both survey instruments were field-tested and revised, as needed, before being used to acquire the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were compiled and analyzed in various ways. Frequencies and percentages were calculated, and various statistical procedures found in Martella, Nelson, and Marchand-Martella were used (1999). These included Chi-square, t-test, and "effect size", or "standardized gain" calculations.

### **Findings**

#### ***Finding 1: Parents have definite goals when enrolling in Even Start.***

- a. They have increased in number over the past three years; and
- b. Those who attain the GED usually pursue further educational skills.

Table 1

#### Goals of Parents Enrolled in Even Start

<b>Goal</b>	<b>1996-1998 (n=371) Follow-up Survey</b>	<b>1998~1999 (n=211)* Follow-up Survey</b>	<b>1998~2000 (n=631)* Parent Survey</b>
Learn English	118 (32%)	116 (55%)	372 (59%)
Obtain GED certificate	195 (53%)	169 (80%)	394 (62%)
Improve parenting skills	19 (5%)	114 (54%)	234 (37%)
Obtain employment	20 (5%)	74 (35%)	255 (40%)
No response	19 (5%)	0	6 (1%)

\*Parents often had multiple goals

Parents enrolled **prior to 1998-99** perceive that their goals were reached as follows:

a. Learn English	46%
b. Obtain GED	44%
c. Improve parenting	95%
d. Obtain employment	60%

Of the 189 who attained the GED certificate, 71, or 38% had enrolled in some kind of community college, technical school, or special training program.

***Finding 2: Parents learn about Even Start from a variety of sources.***

Table 2

Sources of information from which parents learn about Even Start (n=631)

Source of information*	Number	Percent
Family	90	14%
Friends	247	39%
Brochures from school	183	29%
Recruited by ES staff	111	18%
Invite by program parents	72	11%

\*Some heard about the program from more than one source.

Even though friends and brochures sent from school were most effective, it appears that recruitment is best when a variety of techniques are utilized.

***Finding 3: Parents in Even Start increase their reading and writing activities.***

The amount of time they spend in reading and writing activities both in the Even Start classes and at home is often an indicator of one's literacy skills. Reading activities have increased among parents in the program, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

New Reading Activities by Parents Since Participating in Even Start n= 631						
Material	None	A Little	Some	Much	Always	N/R
Newspapers	84	94	111	97	124	121
Magazines	68	88	111	123	103	138
Books	41	56	128	154	174	78
Letters	38	75	105	139	127	147
Notes from school	42	47	100	137	204	101
Medicines/prescriptions	42	47	86	140	176	140
Employment ads	77	44	87	106	121	196

In addition to reading, writing is also an indication of literacy abilities. A number of everyday uses for writing have not been previously utilized by many of these parents. When asked to indicate how much they had increased their writing activities, parents provided the information shown in Table 4.

Table 4

New Writing Activities by Parents Since Participating in Even Start n= 631						
Material	None	A Little	Some	Much	Always	N/R
Stories/journals	71	102	111	90	85	172
Letters	53	101	136	112	84	145
Notes to teachers	73	91	116	106	108	137
Grocery lists	55	63	129	129	144	111
Recipes	101	89	86	90	97	168

Follow-up data also illustrates the increase in the amount of reading and writing by parents after participating in the Even Start program.

Table 5

Reading by Parents Before and After Even Start '99~'00 (n= 211)						
	None	A Little	Some	Much	Very Much	N/R
Before ES	37 (18%)	61 (29%)	34 (16%)	11 (5%)	8 (4%)	60 (28%)
After ES	9 (4%)	36 (17%)	54 (26%)	34 (16%)	14 (7%)	64 (30%)

Parents mostly read books, magazines, and newspapers.

Table 6

Reading by Parents Before and After Even Start '99~'00 (n= 211)						
	None	A Little	Some	Much	Very Much	N/R
Before ES	52 (25%)	59 (28%)	23 (11%)	10 (5%)	7 (3%)	60 (28%)
After ES	20 (9%)	58 (18%)	54 (26%)	19 (9%)	17 (8%)	63 (30%)

Parents mostly wrote letters, diaries, notes, recipes, and shopping lists.

Of 489 parents 294 (47%) parents had a library card 158 (25%) did not have a library card, and 37 did not provide a response. Of the 294 parents who responded they had a library card 198 (67%) responded they got it while after enrolling in the Even Start program.

**Finding 4: Parents in Even Start increase their academic abilities.**

Table 7

Increase in parent's English skills after participating in Even Start as measured by the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) 1998-1990 and 1999-2000

Subject	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance Level	Effect size or Std. Gain
Listening	389	11.3	14.92	.000	.19
		<b>14.1</b>	15.90		
Communication	377	21.6	12.96	.000	.65
		<b>30.0</b>	12.82		
Fluency	397	7.5	7.01	.000	.76
		<b>12.9</b>	12.21		
Reading	350	23.1	15.80	.000	.46
		<b>30.4</b>	16.30		
Writing	326	13.7	7.68	.000	.76
		<b>19.5</b>	11.06		

Table 8

Increase in parent's academic skills after participating in Even Start as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) 1998-1990 and 1999-2000

Subject	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Significance Level	Effect size or Std. Gain
Reading	318	518	91.31	.000	.20
		<b>536</b>	91.12		
Math	330	502	95.81	.000	.24
		<b>526</b>	91.49		
Language	317	508	98.53	.000	.20
		<b>528</b>	94.22		

**Finding 5: Participating in Even Start increases the amount of time parents read to their children.**

Table 9

The amount of time parents read to their children increased after participating in Even Start (n=211)

	None	1 time/wk.	2 times/wk.	4 times/wk.	Every day
Before ES	24%	37%	21%	10%	8%
After ES	4%	8%	26%	31%	31%

The percentage of parents who read to children four times per week or every day more than tripled after participating in Even Start.

***Finding 6: Participating in Even Start increases the amount of time parents help their children with learning activities.***

Table 10

Amount of parental help with their children's learning activities before and after participating in Even Start (n=284\*)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	Every day
<b>Before ES</b>	63 (22%)	40 (14%)	46 (16%)	48 (17%)	87 (31%)
<b>After ES</b>	8 (2%)	9 (3%)	35 (12%)	80 (28%)	153 (58%)

\*There were 32 non-respondents. (These are 1998-99 survey data.)

In the 1999-2000 survey, the age groups of children of Even Start parents were divided into two age groups – ages 0-4 and kindergarten and higher grades – for the question about parental help with learning activities.

Table 11

Amount of parental help with their children's learning activities before and after participating in Even Start (Ages 0-4)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	Every day
<b>Before ES n=232</b>	18 (8%)	36 (16%)	48 (20%)	60 (27%)	70 (30%)
<b>After ES n=237</b>	2 (1%)	10 (4%)	14 (6%)	60 (25%)	151 (64%)

Table 12

Amount of parental help with their children's learning activities before and after participating in Even Start (Kindergarten and higher grades)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	Every day
<b>Before ES n=181</b>	18 (10%)	31 (17%)	34 (19%)	30 (16%)	68 (38%)
<b>After ES n=180</b>	8 (5%)	4 (2%)	16 (9%)	40 (22%)	112 (62%)

One of the goals of Even Start is to promote more involvement of parents in their children's education. The data from this study document that that goal is definitely being attained. Statistical analysis indicated a significant difference at the .001 level.

Table 13

Amount of parental help with their children's learning activities before and after participating in Even Start (Preschool & school children in the follow-up survey)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	Every day
<b>Before ES</b> <b>n=438</b>	93 (21%)	38 (9%)	88 (20%)	77 (18%)	142 (32%)
<b>After ES</b> <b>n=470</b>	23 (5%)	5 (1%)	50 (11%)	123 (26%)	269 (57%)

Follow-up data from families who had exited the program during the two previous years showed very similar results as evident in Table 13. Therefore, the data show that parents continue to help their children even after exiting the program, a trend that is desired by all stakeholders in Even Start family literacy.

***Finding 7: Participating in Even Start increases the amount of time parents spend with their children's teacher.***

Table 14

Number of times per week parents visit with their children's teacher before and after participating in Even Start (n=258)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	5 times/wk
<b>Before ES</b>	97 (38%)	95 (37%)	40 (16)	9 (3%)	17 (6%)
<b>After ES</b>	21 (8%)	88 (34%)	90 (35%)	28 (11%)	31 (12%)

\*There were 58 non-respondents. (These are 1998-99 survey data).

Visiting their children's teacher(s) should become important to parents after participating in Even Start. The data in Table 14 indicate that the program fosters that kind of activity. Again, the score differences between the data sets were statistically significant at the .001 level.

In the 1999-2000 survey, the age groups of children of Even Start parents were divided into two age groups – ages 0~4 and kindergarten and higher grades – for the question about parental visit of their children's teacher.

Table 15

Number of times per week parents visit with their children's teacher before and after participating in Even Start (Ages 0~4)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	5 times/wk
<b>Before ES</b> <b>n=197</b>	75 (38%)	62 (31%)	34 (17%)	11 (6%)	15 (8%)
<b>After ES</b> <b>n=203</b>	19 (9%)	51 (25%)	54 (27%)	37 (18%)	42 (21%)

Table 16

Number of times per week parents visit with their children's teacher before and after participating in Even Start (Kindergarten and higher grades)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	5 times/wk
<b>Before ES</b> <b>n=232</b>	38 (23%)	59 (36%)	40 (24%)	10 (6%)	17 (11%)
<b>After ES</b> <b>n=237</b>	13 (8%)	47 (28%)	35 (22%)	32 (20%)	35 (22%)

Table 17

Number of times per week parents visit with their children's teacher before and after participating in Even Start (Preschool & school children in the follow-up survey)

Time	None	1 time/wk	2 times/wk	4 times/wk	5 times/wk
<b>Before ES</b> <b>n=117</b>	23 (20%)	22 (19%)	34 (29%)	15 (12%)	23 (20%)
<b>After ES</b> <b>n=133</b>	6 (4%)	14 (11%)	35 (26%)	40 (30%)	38 (29%)

As can be seen in Table 17 follow-up data from those parents who had exited the program during previous years showed similar results, except that higher percentages were found at the upper levels. i.e., 4 and 5 per week. This indicates that parents continue to visit their children's teacher even after exiting the program, a positive effect.

***Finding 8: Children in Even Start increase their academic abilities.***

Table 18

Increase in children's academic abilities after participating in Even Start as measured by the Preschool Language Survey (PLS-3) (n=455)

Subject	Before/After	Mean	Std. Dev.	Significance Level	Effect size or Std. Gain
Auditory Compr.	Before <b>After</b>	87.0 <b>92.5</b>	14.71 <b>14.75</b>	.000	.39
Expressive Communic.	Before <b>After</b>	87.3 <b>93.9</b>	16.35 <b>15.97</b>	.000	.40
Standard Score	Before <b>After</b>	175 <b>186</b>	28.85 <b>28.63</b>	.000	.39

***Finding 9: Even Start children improve in school as perceived by their parents.***

Of 344 parents who indicated they had children in school (many of the parents had only children 0-4 years of age), 275 responded to a question about whether their children had improved in school since the family had entered the Even Start program. Of the 275, 256, or 93% indicated that improvement had occurred, whereas, 19 or 7% believed their children had not improved. Ways in which improvement had occurred included:

- a. Better grades
- b. Improved ability to speak English
- c. Lower absenteeism

In one school district, the program coordinator, through data, determined that after participating in Even Start, the absenteeism rate of the children in school of families in the program reduced 2.5 days per year. This didn't seem like much until the number of children per family, the number of families enrolled, and the Average Daily Attendance rate allowed by the state were calculated. This amounted to about \$25,000. per school site and there were multiple sites in the program. You can be assured that administrators in that school really support Even Start.

***Finding 10: Parents are more likely to become employed after participating in Even Start programs.***

Follow up data in regard to employment on those families who had exited from the program (for whatever reason) are discussed in the tables below.

Table 19

Employment status of Even Start programs before and after participation in the program.

	<b>Total number*</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>
<b>Before ES</b>	574	110 (19%)	295 (81%)
<b>After ES</b>	562	256 (46%)	306 (54%)

\*There were some non-respondents to questions about employment.

Although employment of parents is not a goal in Even Start legislation nor of many families when they enroll, as seen in Table 1, it has become the goal of many parents. Economic status is one of the criteria in the "most in need" formula used by most program staff to determine who can attend the program. Simply stated, many parents desperately need the money. This issue is also reflected in the recent welfare reform legislation.

The types of work held by most parents when the telephone survey was administered included the following:

Housekeeping, custodian	Cashier, clerk
Waitress, cook	Childcare/eldercare worker
Teacher's aide	Assembly line
Sales	Driving trucks, other vehicles
Correction employee	(there were others)

When asked the types of work they desired 5 years in the future, their responses included the following:

Any better paying job	Sales
Teacher	Hospital or other medical work
(Some wanted to remain at home until their children enter school.)	

Table 20

Wages earned by Even Start parents.

	<b>Hourly average</b>	<b>Hours per week</b>	<b>Total number employed</b>	<b>Total wages per week</b>
<b>Before ES</b>	\$ 6.22	33.4 hrs	110	\$ 21,148
<b>After ES</b>	\$ 6.60	30.8 hrs	256	\$ 53,856

Even though the hourly wage isn't greatly different and the total hours worked per week by the parents is almost the same, when factoring into the equation the total number of parents employed, a significant difference is found in the total weekly wages earned by all of the parents. These data show a positive association between participation in Even

Start and the income level of the participating parents. (It does not mean cause and effect.)

***Finding 11: Parents in Even Start programs believe they have become good role models for their children.***

Many parents indicated that they had never believed they could be a “role model” for the kind of person they wanted their children to become. However, they gave several examples of how they believe they are now performing that function.

- a. Showing their children the value of education. By attending classes, reading to their children, and emphasizing the importance and pleasure of learning, parents model the kinds of behavior they want their children to follow. In addition, their self-confidence that grows as they attain new learning skills is, in turn, acquired by their children.
- b. Speaking better English. The majority of Even Start parents in Texas speak another primary language and learning English is a major goal (see Table 1). They make significant gains each year as indicated by pre-and-post-test scores on the Basic English Skills Test, the ESL assessment instrument required in adult basic education in Texas. They also indicated that they try to speak more English at home, but that isn’t always an option.
- c. Becoming better parents. In previous years, some programs coordinators had indicated that parents wanted less parenting and more adult education. However, as shown in Table 1, that is changing. When asked, parents can discuss new parenting techniques they now use at home that were learned in Even Start. They also express surprise and pleasure about how well those new skills have improved communication among family members.

***Finding 12: Parents who participate in Even Start programs become better consumers.***

When asked whether they had acquired better shopping skills from participating in Even Start, of the 531 parents who had exited the program in 1996-1997, 1997-1998, and 1998-1999, 394 or 74% stated that they had acquired better skills, whereas 119 or 23% stated that they had not acquired better skills. Eighteen or 3% did not respond to the question. Among those skills indicated most often were:

- a. Can read labels better
- b. Now know how to use coupons
- c. Know how to look for “specials”
- d. Can now compare prices among products
- e. Can now budget money more wisely
- f. Now have better eating habits

As indicated above, not only are former Even Start parents now earning more money, most can also use it more wisely.

***Finding 13: Even Start fosters some community-related activities by parents.***

Through follow-up interviews of those who had exited a program, researchers learned that of the 582 individuals responding, 252 (43%) said they were registered to vote. Of those 252 parents, 100 (40%) indicated that they had registered after enrolling in the Even Start program. Therefore, of the total respondents, 17% had registered to vote after participating in Even Start. (It is quite possible that some of the parents were not eligible to register).

In addition, of 402 respondents, 77 (19%) indicated that they had acquired a driver's license while in Even Start. That is critical because many of those who responded that they didn't have a license also indicated that they drive on a regular basis. In Texas, Department of Public Safety employees will come to programs and offer instruction for acquiring a driver's license. They also want safe drivers on the highway.

One surprising finding was that a large number of Even Start parents do some type of volunteer work. Of 240 respondents, 119 (49.5%) parents responded they volunteered for either a school, a church, or some other organization.

***Finding 14: Even Start produces healthier families.***

Almost 75% of the parents felt that their families were healthier because they had participated in Even Start. When asked "why", they responded.

- a. I know how to contact a doctor;
- b. I can answer the doctor's questions and explain where I hurt;
- c. I can read prescriptions and know how to follow directions; and
- d. We know more about how to stay healthy and avoid getting sick.

***Finding 15: Families who participate in Even Start feel they have more control over their lives.***

When asked about this issue, of the 574 parents who responded, 525 (91%) felt that they now have much more control over their lives then before entering the Even Start program. Reasons for that feeling included:

- a. They have better control over their children, using positive approaches learned in the program;
- b. They know when and how to borrow money, avoiding "credit traps";
- c. They know how to "stretch" their money through wise shopping techniques;

- d. They can speak English and can converse with sales clerks, "check-out" personnel, and other strangers in public; and
- e. They know how to access community social services, when needed.

### **Conclusion**

The data in this limited study document that Even Start family literacy is significantly associated with positive changes demonstrated by the participating families. Not only does the program meet the basic tenets of the legislation, it goes beyond it by enabling families to acquire the kinds of skills needed to become more functional in their daily lives.

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